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Central and Late Medieval Europe

Len Scales

The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God (Psalm 9:17)

NEW ORDER: GENOCIDAL FANTASIES, EUROPEAN TRANSFORMATIONS

For some, genocide is Europe's peculiar gift to the world. Others insist that, far from being atavistic, genocide is a crime of – as well as against – civilisation.¹ Where, then, to place those centuries – between, approximately, the years 1000 and 1500 – in which, if some very distinguished medieval historians are to be believed, European civilisation itself was formed? On the whole, sunny vistas still prevail here – especially on that formative period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries which is sometimes called the 'high' Middle Ages. Here was a Europe of cathedrals and universities, of mind and spirit, in which the peaceful arts prospered in growing towns, new orders of monks sought a foretaste of heaven on earth, and the values of chivalry began to soften the violence of the dark-age warlord. 'Humanism' found a home already in the twelfth no less than the fifteenth century. A 'Europe of sensibility' was being born, which 'brook[ed] no internal boundaries'.² Where to look for the dark side? Was there, from the present volume's perspective, a 'dark side' at all? The history of genocidal thought and action in medieval Europe remains unwritten. Perhaps that is because there is none to write.

There is indeed a history to recount, and the formation of European literate culture, or civilisation, must be given a central part in it. So, too, however, must the developing structures of power upon which civilisations rest; and the history of power in medieval Europe is one of new divisions as well as emergent unities. An eleventh-century illustrated gospel book, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, shows Christ cleansing the

Temple with a whip.³ It might stand as emblematic for much of what was to follow in the period – and what follows in these pages. The book was made for Countess Matilda of Tuscany, close ally of Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085), whose radical vision of a society transformed under papal headship did so much to set Latin Europe on new foundations. The image signals some salient characteristics of the dawning era: a preoccupation with purity and a mission to purge the impure; a new decisiveness in setting boundaries and ruling both in and out; a growing facility in discrimination – understood both as discernment and disfavour; a quest for perfectible *Christian* communities; and a willingness to seek these ends by force. In each of these developments, culture and power were bound up together. They were elements in a ‘Europe of sensibility’ that induced its inhabitants to build up, not tear down, walls. People grew increasingly sensible of *difference* – of the threats which it seemed to pose, but also of their own capacity to meet those perceived threats with violence. The earthly paradise was not for all, and if some were to be gathered in, others must needs be cast out.

The Catholic Church under its reforming popes led the way in separating sheep from goats, while also introducing into European life a new stress on the general, the total, the all-encompassing. These same principles are also to be observed at work in the development of political communities of various kinds in the centuries after 1000 – among them the European kingdoms and the Christian peoples (*gentes, nationes*) to which it was widely believed these kingdoms gave constitutional form.⁴ Peoples claimed a central part in the political assumptions of medieval western Europeans – just as they did in the Bible, from which the political vocabulary of the Latin Middle Ages was to a large extent drawn.⁵ Medieval writers believed that humanity was fundamentally divided on ethnic lines. Its social building blocks were communities held together by ties of blood and shared origin, though also displaying common cultural attributes, ranging from language and law to elements such as dress, hairstyle, food, and manner of war. Common blood also took visible form in stature, physique

and skin colour. That the ethnic unities which medieval observers claimed to perceive were in fact cultural constructs hardly needs stating – but then, they always are. There seems no reason, therefore, to shrink from ascribing to medieval people fully-fledged notions of ethnicity (we might also say ‘race’) and – when these were linked to political titles – nationhood.⁶ For their articulation, medieval writers commanded a substantial and flexible terminology, in Latin and the vernacular tongues, and the manner in which they applied this is often strikingly close to modern usage. If it is also frequently vague, question-begging and contradictory, that, too, will scarcely surprise the student of modern nationalist discourse. The period after the first millennium is marked by the emergence in embryonic form of a Europe of sovereign ‘nation-states’ – political communities which combined claims to constitutional autonomy and territorial integrity with a population base conceived as ethnically homogeneous.⁷ By 1300 this process was, as we will see, entering a crucial and in some ways ominous phase.

The world of Latin Europe in the central and late Middle Ages was an increasingly interconnected one, shaped by the development of communications channels and media more intensive and sophisticated than before. The size of surviving document archives and the number of known manuscript books show a marked increase for the centuries after the first millennium. To a heightened degree, this was a textual, a black-and-white world, in which words themselves became instruments of power – instruments which, with the expanding study of law, philosophy, and theology, literate Europeans were wielding with a new confidence, precision, and transformative effect.

These various changes, in religion, politics and culture, were in their turn made possible by the transformation of economic life and social organisation in the centuries following the first millennium.⁸ Europe’s population rose steadily: on some estimates, between two- and threefold over-all between 1000 and the Black Death (1348-50). The

population of France may have grown from around five to perhaps fifteen million over the same period. All such figures carry a large margin of uncertainty. Not in doubt, however, are the consequences of demographic growth. Vast areas of land were cleared for agriculture to sustain the burgeoning population, forests were felled, marshes drained, and thousands of new villages established. Towns grew in size and number, proliferating across landscapes in which urban life was previously largely unknown. In Westphalia, east of the Rhine in northern Germany, only six towns were to be found before 1180: by 1350 there were 138 (though mostly small). Trade routes, bearing a swelling traffic of people, news and rumour, as well as goods, now linked towns to their rural hinterlands, and entire regions to each other, to the farthest ends of Europe, and to the world beyond. Money, unfamiliar to many at the millennium, became ubiquitous in the following centuries. And with its increased circulation came the powerful, disturbing responses that, underpinned by the Church's teachings and sanctions, it evoked: fascination at its mysteriously transformative effect; and deep fear of that same evident power to change (and taint?) all that it touched.

By the late Middle Ages, Europe's most economically advanced regions were heavily urbanised. In 1300, northern Italy boasted cities with populations in excess of 100,000. By the same date, between fifteen and twenty per cent of English men and women were living in towns. In the fifteenth century, the urban element in the population of Flanders was over a third. Urban centres, and the values and mentalities which they nurtured, now offered a potent challenge to the landed, aristocratic order which had developed across medieval Europe – and a strong attraction to those rural peasantries whose landlords aspired to hold them in subjection. Tensions and conflicts between town and country, but also within the towns themselves, were heightened after the mid-fourteenth century by the sharp and protracted population fall which recurrent bouts of plague visited on much of Europe. Despite these changes, however, the human landscape across the continent was marked by sharp

regional contrasts. While late medieval Brabant (in the north-west, bordering Flanders) sustained around forty five inhabitants to every square kilometre, an equivalent space in the Polish bishopric of Poznań was still home to just two people. Europe's margins long remained relatively empty – and continued to beckon incomers, of diverse status and of more and less pacific intent, from the more densely settled heartlands.

Medieval people thought genocidally. This was partly a consequence of their disposition radically to simplify their world, its past and imagined future, into a story of peoples. Because it was a dynamic story, in which some peoples rose and prospered, others necessarily fell, and even disappeared. Vanishing 'like the Avars' was a familiar enough motif for it to be applied proverbially by a twelfth-century Russian chronicler.⁹ And because earthly life in medieval accounts was filled with violence, the fall of peoples was also violent. Illustration of this view may be found in the numerous legendary accounts of the origins of European nations.¹⁰ Although a handful of these date from the early Middle Ages (and the origin of the genre itself is Roman), their number increases sharply from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It was not invariably through violence that, in these legends, Europe's peoples attained their medieval homelands; but bloodshed is a common enough motif to indicate a characteristic mode of thought. From Bavaria to Brittany and beyond, the forebears of medieval populations were repeatedly portrayed as immigrant warrior bands that had won their territories in a remote past by destroying or expelling the indigenous peoples whom they discovered upon arrival. The tale of the settlement of Britain, recounted by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century and repeated and elaborated thereafter, has the Trojan émigré Brutus and his companions purging the rich isle of Albion of its aboriginal giants. In the settlement myth of the continental Saxons, the Thuringians were present in the Saxons' land first and were removed, through a combination of killings and expulsions, to make way for the newcomers. The Scottish origin legend, as it is encountered in the early fourteenth

century, has the ancient Scots occupying their homeland 'having first driven out the Britons and altogether destroyed the Picts'.¹¹ Thereafter, the victors commonly re-named the conquered land from their own leader or some reputed ancestor, in this way remaking its identity and obliterating what had gone before. In names were concentrated a people's status, titles and claims, and therefore, in one important sense, its very existence.

Such tales are revealing in a number of ways. For one thing, they reflect the earlier roots of medieval beliefs about the relations between different peoples. One of these was in the authority of Antiquity. The legend of Troy offered an example of how, through ethnic destruction and dispersal, new peoples might come into being. More pervasively, there was the template for ethnic history set out in the Old Testament. This precedent had a special importance in portraying the migration and settlement of one particular, divinely-favoured, people and the slaughter and eviction of others as according with God's plan. It was therefore not only inevitable but right that some peoples should prevail and others face oblivion. The idea had already received famous and influential formulation by Bede in the eighth century, in his account of the triumph of the English over the native peoples of Britain¹²; but it was to attain new prominence and applicability after the millennium, in an age that emphasized in novel ways the organically Christian quality of political communities. Underlying all was a vision, inherited from the early Middle Ages and perpetuated through epic and heroic tales, of the feuding and mutual undoing of kindreds, clans and, by natural extension, peoples in obscure yet vividly evoked indigenous pasts. The aestheticisation of violence found in heroic literature, where the most elaborate metaphors were reserved for warriors, their weapons, and the harm they wrought, was to live on in a new and heightened ideological framework in the age of the crusades.

It is no accident that legends recounting the settlement and overthrow of peoples proliferated in western Europe when they did. They belong to an age that brought a new

urgency and confidence to the tasks of explaining, labelling, classifying and distinguishing. Between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, a great deal of broadly ethnographic lore, on subjects ranging from the reputed origins of Islam to the nature and habitation of the fabled ‘monstrous races’ of mankind, passed into circulation among literate Europeans: primarily, though not exclusively, members of the clergy.¹³ The revived interest in classical learning during the twelfth century both extended the quantity of knowledge available about the world and its peoples and enriched the conceptual vocabulary for their analysis. The fruits of these developments are evident in ethnographic writings such as those of Gerald of Wales in the late twelfth century on the Celtic peoples of the British Isles.¹⁴ The impulse to give account (though not necessarily seek understanding) of other peoples was quickened by the crusades against Turks and other Muslims and against the pagan peoples of northern Europe. The rise of the Mongols in the thirteenth century not only confronted westerners with the shock of a strange and terrifying ethnic Other but also, before long, opened up routes through Asia along which some Europeans were able to attain directly an expanded vision of a multifariously peopled world.

Because medieval people regarded ethnicity as an active and fundamental historical presence, they characteristically simplified and exaggerated, sometimes to the point of fictionality, its role in the events and developments with which they linked it. Genocidal thought therefore occupies a more substantial place in European history in this period than do genocidal acts, however broadly conceived. And medieval ideas of what constituted a people’s destruction were very broad. Writers seldom had in mind only systematic mass killing – though killing was nearly always, directly or indirectly, a part of their picture, and they were quite capable of imagining it being done systematically. In many cases, the actions which they invoked are more akin to modern notions of ethnic cleansing than the organised mass murder which some would now regard as the main object of the term genocide. These

actions, real or imagined, characteristically envisaged the forcible creation of ethnically homogeneous landscapes through processes involving various combinations of compulsory re-settlement, eviction, exile and actual slaughter. Often, however, they clearly meant by a people's 'extermination' or 'elimination' – terms by no means rare in medieval writings – little more than its political disenfranchisement, the lopping-off (by means more or less bloody) of its native ruling elite, or the suppression of its means of common defence. Used rhetorically, the language of ethnic destruction might refer to developments in themselves no more violent than subjection to foreign rulers, the dominance of aliens at court, or the violation of alleged native privileges, customs or laws. None of this, however, should be interpreted as meaning that medieval people were not serious in using such language, or that its use need not be taken seriously by modern readers. To act in ways that undermined a people's standing within a competitive economy of peoples or (much the same thing) to threaten the continuation of its name was potentially to act genocidally. Such acts portended real and grave consequences. By stripping a people of the tangible lineaments of common being – indeed, of its historical and constitutional charters *to be* – they marked the start of a path which might well lead quickly to enslavement, murder and oblivion. This was not an unrealistic way of thinking; and the trajectory of destruction which it anticipates was indeed mapped out by more than one ethnic group in this period.

It was not that medieval Europeans imagined the history of relations between different peoples *only* as violent, or thought that good could never come of their interaction. Some origin myths depict immigrant bands intermarrying with indigenous populations, thereby bringing forth offspring who represented a happy blending of the supposedly distinctive qualities of each people. A collection of maxims from twelfth-century Hungary contends that a multi-ethnic kingdom is stronger than one resting only upon a single language and law.¹⁵ Characteristically, however, medieval writers' judgements on the consequences of ethnic

mixing were less favourable. For the fourteenth-century chronicler Thomas Gray, the political fickleness of the English was a regrettable consequence of their being ‘a mixture of diverse nations’. The mutual enmity that seemed readily to arise when different peoples came together likewise argued for their being kept apart. Such antipathies appeared for some to have an inveterate quality. For the German chronicler Ekkehard, the coming-together of German and Frankish knights on the First Crusade only brought to light their ‘natural enmity’.¹⁶

Ancient natural barriers between different European peoples were indeed being undermined, in a more mobile and interconnected age, of which the crusading movement is a prime manifestation. But this seems only to have encouraged in some quarters a heightened insistence on their naturalness and the need for their maintenance. The thirteenth-century chronicler and cartographer Matthew Paris, on a celebrated map of Britain, gave much prominence to the Hadrianic and Antonine walls, with labels denoting the peoples they had ‘once’ kept apart. Other ethnic barriers, meanwhile, had a more urgent and continuing relevance. High-medieval world maps (*mappae mundi*) took pains to depict the great wall which it was believed Alexander the Great had built in the Caucasus, to pen up the cannibalistic peoples of Gog and Magog.¹⁷ Heroic and salutary feats of ethnic engineering were for medieval observers a hallmark of the great ruler. Yet the prophetic scheme of Christian history also disclosed to them that such barriers would not stand for ever, for it was necessary that the genocidal scourge of the ‘unclean peoples’ at some time be unleashed upon Christendom.

RULERS, TERRITORIES, AND THE CHANGING MAP OF PEOPLES

The ethnographic turn and the quest for common origins were impelled by shifts in the political map involving both the formation of political communities within Europe and the

dealings of European powers with their neighbours in a wider world. In this climate, origin legends had an importance beyond mere antiquarianism. They were claims to power and constitutional independence: manifestos, in short, for ethno-political survival where this seemed imperilled. In an age of political expansion and consolidation, there were some who found in the brutally dog-eat-dog world that they evoked, where the genocidally ruthless prevailed, tracts for their own times. The Scottish origin myth was recounted in response to English pretensions, in the age of Edward I (1272-1307), to suppress and swallow up the hitherto-distinct kingdom of Scots. An imaginative vision of the actual fate of those who went down before the onset of conquering kings was unfolded early in the thirteenth century by Gervase of Tilbury, an Englishman writing for the German emperor Otto IV. Gervase told of how Henry II (1154-89) had intervened in Ireland, reordering social relations there, ‘though not without the shedding of much blood of English and Britons’. A new civilisation had thereby dawned in the island, ‘once the foul Irish race had been expelled’.¹⁸ In Scotland, too, ‘a succession of holy kings’ had introduced beneficial changes, but only after ‘the Scots, men of a foul way of life’ were driven out. Of course, no such mass expulsion had occurred in either land. Yet, mistaken as they are, Gervase’s claims are highly significant, indicating how developments even in the very recent past might be understood – or rather, radically misunderstood – in terms of the self-same model of violent ethnic replacement that is found in the origin myths. Socio-political re-ordering meant also a new *ethnic* order. Re-shaking the kaleidoscope of peoples, moreover, pertained especially to kings.

Far-reaching developments were indeed afoot; and at Europe’s expanding high-medieval margins these took on a particular character. If contemporaries simplified the role of ethnicity within them and exaggerated its importance and consequences, their reactions nevertheless illuminate the experience of social and political change for those caught up in it – and the material responses that, for some, those changed facts of life seemed to invite.

Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, population growth, migration, and the transplantation to Europe's frontier zones of legal systems, technologies, and social and political institutions previously developed at its western continental core enabled the establishment of societies which some historians have termed colonial.¹⁹ At Europe's western and eastern extremities, incoming warrior elites founded their dominance over indigenous communities both upon new, overmastering technologies of violence (notably those associated with the armoured heavy cavalryman) and upon self-justifying doctrines of cultural superiority. New power relationships were therefore bound up with changed relations between peoples and cultures – though the interconnections were in reality more complex and varied than the remarks of medieval writers mostly allow us to suspect. Nevertheless, the expansion of certain peoples was indeed in some respects at the expense of others. And it accorded with their familiar habits of thought when contemporary and later observers diagnosed a harsh fate for the losers. Such commentators were not always remote or ignorant. Helmold of Bosau (d. after 1177), who chronicled the conversion of the Baltic Slavs and the settlement of Germans and Flemings in their lands could scarcely have been better informed. Himself a priest at work on the Slav-German frontier when the movement was at its height, he knew personally many of the main participants. For Helmold too, immigration and social change inevitably meant ethnic replacement:

Now ... because God gave plentiful aid and victory to [Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony] and to the other princes, the Slavs have been everywhere crushed and driven out. A people strong and without number have come from the bounds of the ocean, and taken possession of the territories of the Slavs. They have built cities and churches and have grown in riches beyond all estimation.²⁰

Helmold's account of his times is not (here in contrast to Gervase of Tilbury's) fundamentally wrong: not only was the ethnic composition of his region changing: coercion and, at least locally, forced displacements were indeed part of the story. But in its bald ethnic essentialism it is certainly misleading. Nevertheless, it was the first draft of a history that would harden to orthodoxy in the years that followed. In the fifteenth century, the Church reformer and historiographer Dietrich of Niem, himself a native Saxon, would shift part of the by-then mythologized story further back in time. For Dietrich, the Frankish conqueror Charlemagne (768-814) had already destroyed and expelled the Slavs from lower Saxony, 'apart from a handful, who down to the present day dwell in certain rural hamlets, mostly in marshy places, though under perpetual servitude to the Saxons'.²¹

Yet nothing was fixed for ever. Since all medieval peoples tended in their own estimations to rate as doughty warriors, there was no re-making of the ethnic map that might not in its turn be undone by some heroic future act of collective violence. As early as the ninth century, the *History of the Britons* (perhaps wrongly) associated with the name of Nennius was holding out the prophetic hope that the red British serpent would chase from the island the white of the Saxon interloper. The same hope was still alive at the end of the twelfth when, according to Gerald of Wales, the Welsh were drawing from the prophecies of Merlin the expectation 'that both the nation (*natio*) and name of the [English] foreigners shall be expunged' from their land.²² Those who moved between the lines on Europe's colonial frontiers could turn to their advantage the hopes and fears of both camps. As a fourteenth-century Irish poet explained to the first earl of Desmond:

In the [English] foreigners' poems we promise that the Irish shall be driven from Ireland; in the Irishmen's poems we promise that the foreigner shall be routed across the sea.²³

By the troubled fifteenth century, such fears, resting on wildly mythologized recollections of high-medieval migrations and ethno-demographic shifts of the kind we have glimpsed already, might become a basis for explicit agitation. A manifesto of the Czech Hussites (1420) rallied its audience to arms against their German neighbours with a warning that ‘just as they did to our tongue on the Rhine, in Misnia, in Prussia, and drove it out, the same they intend to do to us and to occupy the places of the banished’.²⁴

The two or three centuries which follow the millennium can accurately be called an age of kings. The number of European kingdoms itself grew substantially as also did the capabilities of royal government and the claims advanced in the names of rulers and peoples. The empire-building pretensions of kings, and of quasi-regal figures like Henry the Lion of Saxony (d. 1195), lay at the heart of many of those premonitions and allegations of violent ethnic change which recur in writings from the time. The medieval habit of mapping ethnicity onto constitutional formations meant not only the emergence of new ‘peoples’ within new realms but also, in a climate of political and dynastic flux, the spectre of obliteration for others. The viewpoint which conceived of political revolution as ethnic destruction was given classic formulation by the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon, for whom the Norman conquest of England was an implementation of God’s judgement on the sinful English, namely that they should cease to exist as a people. In twelfth-century imagination, a people’s undoing did not need to involve mass killing. It might do, however: another chronicler, Orderic Vitalis, tells of a plot which came to the notice of King Stephen ‘to kill all the Normans on a fixed day and hand the government of the kingdom over to the Scots’.²⁵ Not all were prepared to accept divine judgement as binding or view the settlement of 1066 as irreversible: inter-ethnic violence might write its own, new histories.

At Europe's margins, changing topographies of peoplehood and power came together with the expanding resources, claims and possibilities of kingship. By the thirteenth century, rulers of the more highly-developed kingdoms were possessed of both the means and the will to reorder in some detail the ethnic landscapes of their realms. Between the 1220s and 1240s, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (d. 1250) relocated the entire Muslim population of his Sicilian kingdom – perhaps numbering between 15,000 and 30,000 people – to the mainland town of Lucera. We have not yet quite heard the last of the Muslims of Lucera. A more modest example of ethno-social engineering illuminates what the king stood to gain. In 1295, Edward I founded an English settler-borough beside his castle at Beaumaris, deep in newly-conquered Wales. The population of a native township on the site was forcibly resettled twelve miles away. The pattern was repeated elsewhere in Wales around the same time, amounting to a not insignificant re-shaking of the pattern of peoples there.²⁶ Economic advantage, defence and security, and the visible display of dominance by a quasi-imperial conqueror might all alike recommend a royal policy of local ethnic displacement.

When the king's actions benefited his peers and native-born followers, all might be well. But matters were not always so simple and the position of kings themselves in relation to the settlement movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries could prove troublingly ambivalent. On the one hand, it had been customary since the earliest times for rulers to draw useful or prestigious foreigners to their realms and courts – a practice whose extension the economic opportunities of the age strongly favoured. On the other, the idea of kings as fathers to their (ideally, ethnically cohesive) peoples was at this time finding increasingly powerful expression. There was nothing new about foreign favourites at court drawing the resentment of native elites; but now, in European frontier regions, those high-status interlopers were just one element within a larger, socially-diverse immigration process. In this climate, alien courtiers seemed in the eyes of some to be malevolent harbingers of a radically new ethnic

order. A Polish chronicler of the early fourteenth century believed that Germans brought in to advise the young princes of Głogów had incited them ‘to exterminate the entire Polish nation, both clergy and laity, and especially the knights’.²⁷ Such fancies took wing the more readily when a ruler harnessed aliens to local development projects like Edward I’s in Wales. Certain kings of Bohemia earned a dark name among the Czech-speaking political classes for using Germans in this way. Přemysl Otakar II (1253-78) had resettled with Germans the suburb beneath Prague castle, at the myth-laden heart of his realm, on one account by expelling the native residents. Within little more than a generation of his death, indigenous myth-making had turned the king’s unpatriotic act into a full-scale plan to hand his kingdom over to the Germans. In the febrile atmosphere of the Hussite agitations of the fifteenth century, the same and worse was being reported of the cosmopolitan Charles IV of Luxembourg (1347-78). Charles had ‘thought to settle the Czech land with the German race, of which he himself came, and gradually root out the Czechs from it’.²⁸

Such spectres drew substance both from an awareness of what kings were by the late Middle Ages capable of doing and from some strikingly ethnocentric ideas about what they might and should do. In the more governmentally-sophisticated realms, such perceptions and assumptions came together relatively early. A twelfth-century estimation of the powers (and intentions) of the English monarchy is glimpsed in Henry of Huntingdon’s depiction of the St Brice’s Day massacre of 1002, in which, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, ‘all the Danish men in England’ had been killed at the behest of King Æthelred II.²⁹ The sparseness of contemporary evidence makes this instance of genocide by royal command hard to judge; but historians have argued for its likely modest extent. Henry, however, presents it as a co-ordinated act of government, underpinned by the systematic dispatch of royal letters to every town in the realm. His picture, while unlikely to be accurate, was certainly prophetic, and by the end of the thirteenth century some royal bureaucracies were capable of targeting

unpopular or controversial groups with police actions of chilling scope and suddenness. ‘You have achieved in one day what the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt failed to do’, was one chronicler’s response to Edward I’s expulsion of the Jews from England. For the poet Geoffrey of Paris, the actions instituted by Philip IV of France (1285-1313) against Jews, Templars and others merged into a single vision of royal purge: ‘Jews, Templars and Christians / Were caught and put in bonds, / And driven from one country to another’.³⁰ The Capetian imitators of Christ were cleansing the regnal Temple with a whip.

The late medieval wars that those formidable royal bureaucracies came to sustain led some to perceive in the kingdoms of Europe, however unrealistically, instruments of organised mass violence portending the outright ethnic obliteration of their neighbours. Edward I’s celebrated claim of 1295, that the French king was preparing an invasion in order to ‘delete’ the English tongue, was to be the first of several such pieces of rhetorical scaremongering set down in the name of late medieval English kings.³¹ In France, where some regions suffered the protracted ravages of war, the late medieval vision of destruction attained Biblical proportions: a late fourteenth-century tapestry portrays the English kings as crowned and mounted Apocalyptic locusts, emerging from the bottomless pit to devour the land (Revelation 9: 1-11).³² As will shortly become clear, the totality of this vision of destruction was characteristic of an important strand in medieval ethno-religious thought, as was also its polarising quality, pitting holy kings and chosen peoples against personified evil – dehumanised, bestial and unclean.

The notes of extremism, and the harnessing to violent acts of a violently ethnocentric rhetoric, also infused other elements of late medieval life. The richness and the character of the surviving sources may admittedly make the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries appear to us more distinct from what had gone before than they actually were. It is clear, however, that reports and predictions of large-scale bloodshed were also underlain by new currents and

tensions in social and religious life. The prospect of organised mass killing was periodically in the air in various contexts, not always related to ethnicity. Some radical religious groups believed a general slaughter of the clergy to be imminent, while both lords and peasant communities in various parts of Europe confronted from time to time the seemingly impending prospect of fundamental and bloody social upheaval. Where members of different ethnic groups were involved, movements and conflicts with complex origins were easily seen as struggles between implacable rival peoples. Such perceptions came to the fore especially in the towns, whose spectacular growth in number and size across much of Europe was one of the most enduring legacies of the post-millennium period. Towns, with their complex and periodically acute social tensions and power rivalries, penned up natives and aliens together in closely confined spaces under circumstances apt to render the outsider both visible and vulnerable.

The hothouse urban environment encouraged the invocation of ethnic divisions to explain conflicts stemming in part from other discontents: economic, political, devotional, local or even professional. Alien university masters and students might be forced out, as several hundred Germans were from Prague in 1409. Foreign garrisons were massacred – as in Palermo in 1282 or Bruges in 1302.³³ In various parts of Europe, barriers were now being raised, with towns making it harder for foreigners to settle or practice crafts, or excluding them altogether. Bouts of economic hardship and political instability were liable to be attended by outbreaks of violence against resident foreign merchants, seamen or artisans. Occasionally, these attained major proportions and left substantial numbers dead, as did the attacks on ‘Flemings’ in the south and east of England in 1381.³⁴ The ‘great rising’ in June of that year was a response to the perceived corruption and incapacity of English royal government, particularly in its handling of the war with France. Its background, however, lay in the disintegration of social hierarchies and the legal relationships that underpinned them in

the circumstances of sharp demographic downturn, falling rents, and rising labour costs which followed the Black Death. The anti-alien violence which accompanied the rising, particularly the killing of many foreign artisans and merchants in London, illustrates clearly how urban spaces might act to draw social and political discontents to a focus in inter-ethnic bloodshed.

Often, admittedly, such late medieval bloodshed was the outcome of mere riots or drunken brawls. Increasingly, however, if contemporary reports are to be believed, the voice of the people was to be heard on such occasions, clamouring for a general destruction of the foreigner. ‘Death to the French!’ ‘Kill all Flemings!’ Those same reports tell also of the homely watchwords that conspirators coined to affirm their solidarity and to tongue-tie and expose the alien in their midst. Without question, our sources commonly exaggerate the destructiveness of such disorders and simplify the role of ethnicity in them; but this exaggeration itself reveals much about contemporary moods. And where popular disturbances attracted more than local support, modest revisions to the ethnic map bequeathed by high-medieval migration might indeed result. The revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr in early fifteenth-century Wales induced some inhabitants of the English boroughs to take flight for England. Local ethnic displacement was more substantial where social and political tensions were combined with religion, as they were in fifteenth-century Bohemia, resulting in the purging of German communities from a number of towns, including the capital.³⁵

By this time, contending political and social groups were able to hurl at each other stereotyped vocabularies of ethnocentric abuse of much radicalism and menace. Compiling lists of the supposed good and (particularly) bad qualities of different peoples was nothing new: as a literary exercise it went back to Antiquity. The classification of peoples began, however, to shed its dry school-book quality during the twelfth century, in context of a broader interest among educated Europeans in the nature of humanity, coupled with a revived application of Antique notions of the barbarian.³⁶ These developments were taking place at a

time when colonisation and state-building were lending such cultural pursuits a keen political edge, and developments in the Church underpinning them with a new facility in judging and condemning. Against this background, certain peoples – particularly those which found themselves locked in violent competition with their neighbours – came to be subjected to negative portrayals more eloquent and absolute than before, backed by a new doctrinal authority, and bearing an underlying call to destruction. Definitions of humanity emphasising reason, cultivation and order were deployed to portray enemies and subject populations as less than fully human. The Irish, in English accounts, were ‘wild’, the Scots ‘bestial men’. The Germans were ‘dog-heads’ – semi-humans, evoking the monstrous beings supposed to inhabit the earth’s arid margins. The lives of such ones were surely cheaper than those of the fully human. The English in fourteenth-century Ireland were accused of saying that it was no more a sin to kill an Irishman than a dog.³⁷ To monstrosity and sub-humanity were added associations of filth, pollution, and parasitism. The Czechs were a ‘putrid odour’ to the Bohemian king Sigismund (1419-37), while for a fourteenth-century Czech pamphleteer their German rivals were ‘wolves in the fold, flies on the food, serpents in the bosom, harlots in the house’.³⁸

That a land should be cleansed of such pollutants appeared axiomatic; and a luxuriating imagery of weeds and vermin indicated not only problems, but solutions. ‘When [the Irish] fall into your hands pluck them all up by the root, as the good gardener doth the nettle’, urged a fourteenth-century Dublin notary.³⁹ Talk of beasts – the Irish as hares, for example – led on naturally to talk of hunting. The task could seem the more urgent since beastliness and hybridity were no neutral states. Monsters (as their supposed Latin cognates, *monstro*, *moneo*, made clear) were signs and warnings: they spoke of sin. For Gerald of Wales, it was the propensity of the Irish for bestial, incestuous and other illicit sex that explained the proliferation of malformed people in their land. But to some, the image of their

neighbours spoke of things beyond sin: active malevolence, imminent danger. The vocabulary of inter-ethnic defamation thus merged at its extreme end with one of absolute evil. Heretics were also routinely compared to parasites; the encroaching Mongols too were a monster-people, their wickedness encoded in misshapen bodies. Bohemia's Germans were for one Czech author an 'accursed tribe', as utterly outside the fold as Muslims or Jews.⁴⁰ To speak in this way of wayward and unclean races was to invoke an Old-Testament template – one that pointed towards the extirpation of the wicked by the chosen under their divinely-blessed leaders.⁴¹

PEOPLES ACCURSED OF GOD: VIOLENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN FRONTIER

It was when the language of ethnic distinction became overlaid with that of divine favour and disfavour that fantasies of the destruction of peoples most often found a measure of material fulfilment. The Reform movement in the eleventh-century Church offered western Europeans not only the vision of a purified Christian community and distinct criteria for inclusion and exclusion, but a strong imperative to act for its creation. And action was from the outset conceived in part as a cleansing struggle between peoples. A chronicle account of Pope Urban II's speech of 1095 inaugurating the First Crusade has him appeal to the Franks as a people divinely chosen. The Muslim occupiers of the Holy Places, on the other hand, were 'an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God'.⁴² While the mass slaughter of Muslims was not a specific aim of the crusaders, a degree of territorial purification was. Not only Muslims and Jews, but all who were not Latin Christians were initially purged from Jerusalem following the city's fall in 1099 and forbidden to dwell there. While some native Christians were subsequently re-admitted, the bar to Jews and Muslims remained. And if outright mass killing proved to be but a partial and temporary phenomenon, it certainly occurred. Not only were many of Jerusalem's Muslims and Jews put to the sword when the city fell; large-scale

slaughter of non-Christians continued in other Palestinian cities upon their capture by the Latins throughout the first decade of the twelfth century. Moreover, in a manner which was to be characteristic of crusading warfare, western commentators celebrated the killing of non-Christians, and talked up the body count. When Jerusalem fell, men rode through blood up to their knees and the bridle bits of their horses. 'Has anyone ever seen or heard of such a slaughter of the infidel race?', wondered one chronicler. 'God alone knows the number for no one else does.'⁴³

The same large and general acts, the same absolute distinctions between damned and saved, were transferable to other Christian frontiers. Henry of Livonia tells how in 1227 'all the people of both sexes' were baptised on Ösel (Saaremaa) in the Gulf of Riga, following the island's conquest by a crusading army. The Christian priests 'watered the nations by the font, and their faces with tears'. It was not to last. Another chronicler explains how in 1260 the island's inhabitants 'broke away and left not a single Christian alive in all their territories'. 'Later', he adds, 'many of them were destroyed for doing this'.⁴⁴ Bloodshed followed quickly on the watering of the gentiles – and each was conceived as a general act. The manner of thought was characteristic; so too the scale of violence. 'Kill them *all*; Truly, God will know his own!' The words, attributed to a papal legate at the massacre of the population of Béziers (1209) during the Albigensian crusade, may never have been uttered; but the writer who set them down just a few years afterwards captured the spirit of time and context.⁴⁵ Crusaders shed blood with hopeful hearts and easy consciences, and the chivalric norms which were curbing some of the extremities of war at Europe's core counted for much less on a religious frontier. The population in some parts of Prussia may have fallen for a time by between twenty and fifty per cent during the Teutonic Order's destructive conquest – part holy war, part strategic land-grab – in the thirteenth century.⁴⁶ Crusading doctrine, to its proponents, stiffened the soldier's will against pragmatism and backsliding. It made of him also an ethnic

warrior. St Bernard of Clairvaux sought to rouse up the German nobility for a crusade against the Baltic Slavs with the injunction that they should ‘take vengeance on the [pagan] peoples and exterminate them from the land of our Christian name’. There was to be no peace ‘until, with God’s aid, either the [heathen] rite itself or the population [*natio*] has been destroyed’.⁴⁷

The resulting expedition – the ‘Wendish Crusade’ of 1147 – predictably took a different and far more limited course than that urged by the zealot Bernard. Nevertheless, his conception of the crusade as a radical contest of *peoples* is affirmed by others. Helmold of Bosau writes as often of Slavs and Saxons as he does of pagans and Christians. Most religious frontiers were also cultural and ethnic ones, and religion itself readily conceived as an attribute of peoplehood, reflecting shared character and identity. A story survives of how a group of Livonians in the late twelfth century decided to wash off their recent baptism with the waters of the River Dvina and thus send their Christianity back to the land of the Saxons, whence it came. It was not therefore only for Bernard that religious non-conformity dictated ethnic destruction. It was as a race of heretics that, for the German Dominican Johann Falkenberg (writing c.1412), all Poles merited extermination.⁴⁸ The doctrines of Church reformers and crusade preachers were by the late Middle Ages furnishing western Europeans with a powerful conception of *Christian* community, within which the presence of alien groups looked increasingly unacceptable.

The power of this doctrine to re-shape the ethnic landscape became particularly apparent with its growing assimilation to the political sphere. By the thirteenth century, princes and their learned apologists were increasingly harnessing invocations of sacred community to notions of shared political allegiance and legal doctrines exalting the power of monarchs within their consolidating realms. Their exclusionary potential was realised earliest on the frontier. The fall of Seville to the king of Castile in 1248 was followed by the wholesale expulsion of its Muslim population. In thinly populated frontier zones, such

changes were apt to prove only temporary. At Europe's core, however, they would be more secure. The last crusader strongholds in the Latin East fell in 1291; but at exactly that time rulers were acting with a new resolve to build their own purified Christian holy lands on European soil. It marked a significant new departure when the entire Muslim population of Minorca was enslaved following the island's fall to the Aragonese in 1287. In 1300, the deeply devout Charles II of Naples (nephew of one royal saint and father to another) sold into slavery the Muslims of Lucera. The city was henceforth to be a Christian space, protected by the Virgin Mary.⁴⁹ The Promised Land had come home; but this only served to highlight the obligation upon those (Christian) Israelites to whom it rightly belonged to destroy the unclean Canaanite peoples whose presence still befouled it.

THE TEMPLE AND THE WHIP: THE JEWS IN A CHRISTIAN EUROPE

A thirteenth-century *mappa mundi* portrays the figure of Christ as physically merged with a created and peopled world.⁵⁰ The centuries after the first millennium saw Christ drawn closer to humanity, which in turn became conceivable as a Christian body – or, politically, as a community of Christian peoples under their kings. Christ's body and blood lent legitimacy and affirmed common bonds; but they also became an increasingly extensive charter for shedding the blood of those not of that body (-politic). The communities of Jews, which by the eleventh century were already numerous and widely-scattered through Europe, would in the period that followed become the object of the most virulently genocidal rhetoric and the most extensive and radical violence to be suffered by any European ethnic group. And yet, unique though these were in scope, intensity and consequences, they also resemble in certain ways the patterns of abuse and coercion that we have discovered underlying other medieval inter-ethnic conflicts. Latin Christians wrote about Jews in a (highly abusive) language of race. For Peter the Venerable (d. 1156) they were a 'wretched people'. The chronicler Guibert

of Nogent portrays crusaders in 1096 wondering why they were making an arduous journey to the East when ‘the Jews, of all races the worst foes of God, are before our eyes’.⁵¹ Jews became the subject of a repertoire of defamatory stereotypes that mirrored and extended those which Christian peoples applied to each other. Jews too were likened to vermin. They were less than fully human, assimilated by physiognomy (as also were Muslims) to the ‘monstrous races’; they were associated with demons and with the baser animals: in bestiaries, the hyena was a Jew-prototype. Jews acted as a community – to Christian polemicists, an encompassing, malevolent and conspiratorial community. As a people, they were linked by blood to other accursed races: for Matthew Paris, the Mongols were the ten Lost Tribes, whose destructive onset was in concert with their kinsmen within Christendom.⁵²

They came, moreover, increasingly to be associated, by a variety of commentators, with *general* schemes of pollution and violence, inviting in turn violent general responses. In 1321, wild rumours associated the Jews of Languedoc in a well-poisoning conspiracy with lepers (who wished *all* people to be leprous) and with outside Muslim powers.⁵³ With the high-medieval humanisation of the figure of Christ and the Christianisation of human communities went a growing tendency to depict Jews as not only deicidal but genocidal. Their supposed practice of mistreating consecrated communion hosts was not only a re-enactment of the crucifixion on Christ’s miraculous body; it was an attack on the unity of Christ and his people.

There were still some within Christian Europe who came to the Jews’ defence: distinguished churchmen, popes among them, who reiterated the traditional defence of the Jews’ presence in Christendom as divinely-willed and spoke against the wilder anti-Judaic fantasies. Over time, however, their arguments proved less and less able to prevail against rival currents, also drawing on Christian justifications, which urged the Jews’ exclusion or destruction. It was from fear of their ‘extermination’, explained Pope Innocent IV in 1247,

that Jews in Germany had sought his aid.⁵⁴ The fear was by this date an increasingly realistic one.

The earliest major attacks on Jewish communities in Europe had been during the First Crusade, and subsequent expeditions were also attended by localised bouts of bloodletting. However, it was from the later thirteenth century that anti-Jewish violence in Europe took on new proportions. It is estimated that several thousand may have perished in the agitations that convulsed parts of Germany in 1298, inspired by host-desecration charges. However, bloodshed of a quite new extent and thoroughness was attained in the massacres which heralded the arrival of the Black Death in central Europe during the years 1348-50. In town after town, well-poisoning rumours became a pretext for the systematic killing of entire Jewish communities. Nearly a thousand may have died in the German town of Erfurt alone. In some places – Basel, Strasbourg, Constance – the Jews were forced into specially-constructed houses to be burned. A contemporary chronicler claimed that it took six days to burn Strasbourg's Jews on account of their number. 'And I could believe', he mused, 'that the end of the Hebrews had come'.⁵⁵

Elsewhere in Europe, princes had already by this date taken steps of their own to reaffirm the Christian character of their realms, by means of the mass expulsion of their Jewish populations. Whereas Church reformers and heretics had pursued their rival visions of a purged and purified Christian heaven on earth, Catholic monarchs now laid more limited plans for building 'heaven in one country'. England's Jews were forced out by Edward I in 1290. The Jews of France, who had suffered temporary expulsions and other oppressions under previous kings, were systematically driven from the realm by Philip IV in 1306. As many as 100,000 people may have been compelled to leave.⁵⁶ The pattern was repeated in other late medieval realms, down to the mass expulsion of the large Jewish populations of the Iberian kingdoms at the end of the fifteenth century. In part, princes now acted in this way

because, as we have seen, they had attained the governmental means to do so. More importantly, however, some rulers had come by this time to view the purification of their realms as a sacred duty. There was henceforth to be just one – organically Christian – Chosen People, rightfully occupying the holy soil of its own sovereign kingdom under its rightful and anointed king. Read as a constitutional text, the Bible itself had come to represent, for the peoples of medieval Europe and for their rulers, the most powerful, and fatally empowering, collective origin myth of all.

RULED OUT: EXCLUSIONARY IMPULSES AND THE MAKING OF EUROPE

The existence of peoples in Europe in the central and later Middle Ages reflected the facts of power: for contemporaries, ethnic communities were axiomatically political ones. To imperil a people's political status, as embodied in its privileges, laws, common institutions, in the power of its members to *act* politically, and more numinously in their sense of shared prestige and distinctiveness within a world of peoples, was to act genocidally. In a period that saw extensive changes to the European political map, the spectre of such acts never seemed far remote. Where the interactions of different peoples were most intensive, stress-laden, and ideologically- and politically-charged – on the frontier, at the courts of princes, or in the great towns – acts of ethnic destruction were anticipated, and in some quarters sought, most keenly. Medieval people were prone to simplify and exaggerate the role of ethnicity in the conflicts of their day. Consequently, the destruction of peoples – even in their own broad understanding of that phenomenon – did not occur nearly as often as they expected. In spite of this, their diagnosis of its causality and likely course was fundamentally correct. When entire populations were indeed subjected to systematic violence, enslavement or eviction, those acts were usually preceded – often over a protracted period – by other seemingly lesser ones, which served to strip the group of its political and legal independence: its autonomous right to

be. ‘The king’s Jews’ necessarily waited on the king’s will; and his will was by the late Middle Ages taking, across much of Europe, an increasingly ethnocentric turn.

The pattern was not bound to be repeated everywhere, of course. Political and legal marginalisation did not have to lead to collective oblivion: it did not do so, for example, in late medieval Ireland or post-conquest Wales. Outright ethnic destruction was most likely to occur where political subjugation was reinforced by fundamental religious difference. Pagans, Muslims, and Jews, but also, in an age of sharpened conceptions of religious orthodoxy, adherents of (for their opponents) false forms of Christianity, were singled out for extreme solutions. For the rest, the history of this long period is partly one of how, through more intensive and precisely-defined interactions, different imagined ethnic groups evolved forms of coexistence and mutual accommodation. Nevertheless, Europeans were also by the end of the Middle Ages more practised and accomplished ethnic discriminators and excluders, in thought and deed, than they had been in earlier times. Their world was one of more sharply-defined and cohesive communities, in which the alien was more conspicuous, more readily and vehemently named, and less easily accommodated: a world that sought unities and was keenly sensible of the problems of coping with multiplicity. Their power fundamentally to rule out, and conviction that such ruling-out was needful, ultimately derived in large part from those same currents of social change, religious reform and intellectual renewal which had also provided a foundation for the period’s most startling cultural achievements and advances – as some would say, for European civilisation itself.

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⁴⁶ Hartmut Boockmann, *Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas: Ostpreußen und Westpreußen* (Berlin: Siedler, 1992), 138.

⁴⁷ Hans-Dietrich Kahl, 'Crusading eschatology as seen by St Bernard in the years 1146 to 1148', in Michael Gervers (ed.), *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 42-3.

⁴⁸ *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, trans. and intro. Brundage, 34; Hartmut Boockmann, *Johannes Falkenberg, der Deutsche Orden und die polnische Politik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), ch. 2.

⁴⁹ Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation* (London: Alan Lane, 2003), 112 (Seville); for Minorca and Lucera see David Abulafia, 'Monarchs and minorities in the Christian western Mediterranean around 1300: Lucera and its analogues', in Scott Waugh and Peter Diehl (eds.), *Christendom and its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution and Rebellion 1000-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 234-63.

⁵⁰ Harvey, *Medieval Maps*, 28.

⁵¹ Jeremy Cohen, 'Christian theology and anti-Jewish violence in the Middle Ages: connections and disjunctions', in Anna Sapir Abulafia (ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 47, 49.

⁵² Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 133-6, 147-8; Sophia Menache, 'Tartars, Jews, Saracens and the Jewish-Mongol 'plot' of 1241', *History* 81 (1996), 319-42.

⁵³ Malcolm Barber, 'Lepers, Jews and Moslems: the plot to overthrow Christendom in 1321', *History* 66 (1981), 1-17

⁵⁴ Edward A. Synan, *The Popes and the Jews in the Middle Ages* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1965), 114-15.

⁵⁵ Michael Toch, *Die Juden im mittelalterlichen Reich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998), 60 (for 1298); František Graus, *Pest, Geißler, Judenmorde: Das 14. Jahrhundert als Krisenzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 168-214; Rosemary Horrox (ed. and trans.), *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 208-10.

⁵⁶ William C. Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews: From Philip Augustus to the Last Capetians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 202.